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## The identity trap

By Stan Grant  
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"What do I have in common with the Jews? I hardly have anything in common with myself." Franz Kafka

That I am an Indigenous person is a fact of birth. That is who I am but not all I am. The reality is more ambiguous, writes Stan Grant.

Zimbabwe is a strange place in which to feel liberated. Life under Robert Mugabe is not something I would willingly choose. But this was the first place I touched down outside Australia. I was en route to South Africa to cover the end of apartheid. I waited, in a swelteringly hot airport lounge, for a connecting flight and no one knew or cared that I was Aboriginal.

I was a world away from the history that had shaped me. I was free from having to explain myself or conform to a particular identity. These people were black in ways that I wasn't. They were Africans, and to them I was simply an Australian.

The idea that I am Australian hits me with a thud. It is a blinding self-realisation that collides with the comfortable notion of who I am.

To be honest, for an Indigenous person, it can feel like a betrayal somehow - at the very least, a capitulation. We are so used to telling ourselves that Australia is a white country: am I now white?

That I am an Indigenous person is a fact of birth: my father is a Wiradjuri man from central and south-west NSW; my mother is from the Kamilaroi people of the state's north-west. That is who I am but not all I am. The reality is more ambiguous, defying easy definition even as I may prefer to cloak it in a veil of certainty. To borrow from Franz Kafka, identity is a cage in search of a bird.

I was born into the "half-caste" community that emerged from the Australian frontier; this hybrid society formed out of the clash of the first peoples and the new. They married each other and repopulated in harsh segregated missions and settlements designed to Christianise and "civilise" us as the pillow was being smoothed for the slow death of a people.

My family has suffered, through generations lived at the coalface of poverty and bigotry. I was born into a life on the margins, as I have written in *Talking to My Country*: "We lived in Australia and Australia was for other people."

But I have grown from the boy I was and my country has grown from the land it was. Can I truly see privilege as "white"? Is it "black" to suffer crippling disadvantage? If these things are true, then I am assuredly "white."

I am an Australian, with all the privilege that brings. I am in the highest-earning category in the country, I live in a nice house, I have a good car, I can eat out and not bother to check the bill; my children have been to the best schools money can buy, not just in Australia but around the world. I have had a career that has allowed me to realise all my dreams.

Aboriginal people have historically been defined and redefined in and out of existence. The Australian Law Reform Commission counts since settlement 64 separate categories of "Aboriginal".

The Commonwealth legal definition of Aboriginality is a three-pronged process built around ancestry, self-identification and community acceptance. To "qualify" as an Aboriginal person, one must get the endorsement of an Indigenous organisation: a letter of Aboriginality. I cannot think of a more degrading, demoralising and potentially devastating process.

I have never sought, nor would I ever seek, any such proof of who I am. But Indigenous people are constantly reminded that their identities are in question - reminded of the box they must belong to. It is there in every official form - when we enrol our children in school, join a sporting organisation, apply for a loan or fill in the national census, the box demands to be ticked: are you Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? No one else in Australia is asked to define themselves so exclusively. Academic Marcia Langton, herself an accomplished Indigenous woman, has cautioned against a creeping sense of Indigenous exceptionalism - a belief in entitlement - tied to identity, which can deter Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from joining the mainstream of Australian life.

Aboriginal people are bound to a communal identity. This can impose a rigid conformity, accompanied sometimes by an intimidating lateral violence. Self-righteous Indigenous people take on the role of "identity police," deciding who is in or out. All the while, Aboriginal people face having to explain themselves to a wary, sceptical, ignorant - even hostile - Australian public. There is vigorous debate within the Indigenous community that bristles against a narrowly defined identity. It can feel like a straitjacket. Yin Paradies is an example of someone with Indigenous heritage who chafes at orthodox interpretations of identity. An academic of Indigenous-Anglo-Asian heritage, Paradies says he represents both "coloniser and colonised", "black and consummately white".

He has described a "prison-house of identity" that means his efforts to express a hybrid sense of himself lead to attacks on his authenticity. He says he has been called a "coconut" and a "nine-to-five black" taking a job from a "real Aborigine".

Paradies doesn't deny that Aboriginal people have suffered "a deplorable history of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion", but that doesn't solely define him. Yet, he says, Aboriginal people looking to history for their identity have no trouble finding white supporters to encourage them, and to accord them an unquestioned expertise.

Being Aboriginal can be a qualification in itself, he writes: "The idea that indigeneity is synonymous with suffering and marginality, together with the misconception that such 'victimhood' bestows privileged access to social truths, leads to uncritical acceptance of the views, opinions and scholarship of Indigenous people about Indigenous issues."

A former public servant, Kerryn Pholi, publicly renounced her "Aboriginal identity" in an article she titled "Why I burned my 'Proof of Aboriginality'". She said she grew tired of being a "professional Aborigine" in the "Aboriginal industry." Pholi said she didn't feel "particularly proud to be Aboriginal", which she equated with a "skinhead thumping his chest and saying he is proud to be white".

Pholi said that, like others, she worked in Aboriginal-identified positions and would "harangue a room full of people with real qualifications and decades of experience with whatever self-serving, uninformed drivel ... happened to pop into my head". She said there was "nothing special" in being able to trace her ancestry back to a "stone-age way of life". She was "grateful to the 'white invaders'" for lifting her into modernity.

I quote Pholi merely to illustrate the bind a rigid concept of Aboriginal identity can place us in. Pholi rejects her Aboriginality with the same zealotry as those who proselytise the moral superiority of Indigenous people. She lacks the subtlety and nuance of Paradies' writings. Where he seeks to illuminate and broaden the discussion of the possibilities of multilayered identity, Pholi ridicules the notion of any unique Indigenous worldview. Her focus on being a "professional Aborigine" is appropriate, because she writes like a disgruntled employee who has slammed the door on the way out and is now furiously tweeting insults about her former colleagues. But despite Pholi's intemperate and tabloid language, her article is not entirely bereft of insight. Indigenous identity has been corporatised and exploited for profit by some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Political scientist Terry Moore offers a more penetrating analysis, focusing on how government has adopted contemporary notions of Aboriginal identity which elevate the importance of difference and resistance, thereby denying Aboriginal people the "potential of being both Aboriginal and Australian, being different and belonging. They maintain Aboriginal marginality".

Moore writes of a "mythological Aboriginality" that does not reflect the lived reality of many Indigenous people. Aboriginal urban elites and their supporters, Moore says, perpetuate this while simultaneously stigmatising whiteness. In short: rejecting whiteness makes you more black.

At various stages of my life, I have probably been as guilty as anyone of assuming superiority and enhancing difference that can lead to divisiveness. I caught a glimpse of my younger, naive self when a group of young people took to the stage at a conference of Indigenous people in Victoria. They were impressive: confident and articulate, but with all the foolishness of youth. One of them, an especially vocal young woman with a permanent earnest frown and obviously of mixed heritage, spoke of wanting to "dismantle her whiteness" and the need to "rid education of whiteness".

I allowed myself a wry grin and a shake of the head, thinking, well, there goes Shakespeare, Einstein and Newton; I wondered from where she would derive her politics without Marx or her philosophy without Foucault!

She said she was tired - an amusing thought: tired at 25! - of constantly explaining herself to white people, and now associated only with other black people. This was precisely what Terry Moore warned about: anti-white superiority.

But harmlessly amusing as she was, the ideas are dangerous. We live in a world and an era of sharp identity politics that is wreaking devastation. Look around: the resurgence of political populism on the left and right; hardening and violent sectarian divisions; hyper gender and racial awareness and division; a stultifying climate of debate where the participants lecture, abuse and try to silence rather than discuss and reason.

We walk a precipice when we analyse identity: Indigenous identity, especially. I am sensitive to those who have suffered terribly for identity denied or imposed. Aboriginal skulls rest in glass jars, hostages to the long-abandoned pseudo-sciences of phrenology and eugenics that judged my ancestors a lower form of humanity.

Simply to survive here we had to overcome those who would breed us out. Children were separated from families and instructed to "act white, think white, be white". Poking and prodding identity only risks reopening old wounds. I am cautious, too, lest my words be twisted and taken up by arch-assimilationists, who would prefer we abandon all allegiance to family and heritage to become - what they benignly refer to as - just Australians: an identity that they reserve the right to define and confer.

Trepidation aside, I should not be deterred from examining identity, particularly my own. Whatever my questions, I have a deep attachment to those I see as "my people": a fraternity akin to that felt by Jewish people, wherever in the world they come from and despite their differences. I share a common history, a kinship, elements of culture and a concern for the future with other people who similarly identify broadly with being Indigenous. With just a passing nod in the street, we can tell each other we are still here. We understand each other in a way that sometimes still eludes me even with those non-Indigenous people closest to me. There is no one I could love more than my wife, yet there are times when we could be speaking different languages: mine from my Aboriginal roots and hers as a white Australian. Rather than separating us, I see our differences as the grit that polishes our relationship. Identity is a two-way mirror - what we project and what others perceive. As the broader Australian community has constructed its image of what an Indigenous person is, so we conform to meet expectations.

The economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has warned of the dangers of what he calls a "solitarist identity", which encourages difference that at best breeds misunderstanding and at worst violence, as our "shared humanity gets savagely challenged when the manifold divisions of the world are unified into one allegedly dominant system of classification".

As a reporter I have seen the human debris from this clash of cultures, religions, civilisations and identities: think Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda; Sunni and Shia

throughout the Middle East; Hindu and Muslim in India and Pakistan; and Israeli versus Palestinian.

Fundamentalists everywhere feed on the politics of identity: from right-wing political extremists to radical Islam associated with groups like al-Qaeda, the Islamic State or Boko Haram.

Sen says singular, overarching classifications can make the world "inflammable". Put simply: division breeds hate. Identity can be a source of warmth and richness, and it can add to a tapestry of difference that we can all share, or it can incite hatred, violence and terror. I am attracted to Sen's idea of "layered identities"; in this way my Indigenous heritage forms a core part of my being, but I am also a man who speaks some Chinese, enjoys Italian food, is fascinated by international affairs and politics, and is at home living in the world's great cities.

In truth I was born a "young fogey", with an inbuilt natural reserve and conservatism. I don't like ostentatious displays; I prefer the quietness of my room, with my books and music, to the noise of the crowd. I admire stoicism more than flash. I love all things British: soft English rain, the green meadows, the barren moors: London with its lingering ghosts. English music has been the soundtrack of my life, from the bands I first fell in love with - the Beatles, the Stones, the Who and the Kinks - to my teenage obsession with the Jam and the Clash, and later the quintessentially fey Smiths.

Can an Aborigine be a Smiths fan? I can be whatever I damn like.

I am a product as much, if not more, of the European Enlightenment (which belongs to all of us, not just to the West) as I am of the Dreaming. I don't seek or need any endorsement from a community to tell me who I am; I don't try to profit from being Aboriginal - I take my skills and expertise to the marketplace, not my identity. I don't want to be put into any box; but rather, as Immanuel Kant said, to live free from "the ball and chain of an everlasting permanent minority".

Why would Indigenous people today look to perpetuate potentially harmful divisions? Especially when those same divisions hurt us. Why would a young girl with a life of limitless possibilities hitch herself to separatism and victimhood? Why would she not look to find joy in a shared humanity? I see it as a terrible loss. My life has been enriched by friendships that span the globe.

These are critical times; we need to ask fundamental questions: are we ready, capable and prepared to take up a place at the centre of Australian social, political and economic life? Is Australia ready to embrace the idea of a bigger country whose constitution reflects a deeper history than just the story of British settlement?

In a world where the bonds of democracy are fraying, can our democracy encompass an acknowledgment of the sovereignty of first peoples? Must we lag as the only Commonwealth nation not to have a treaty with Indigenous people?

A fuller discussion of this is beyond the scope of this essay, except to say that this isn't about separatism or assimilation, but rather about engagement from a position of strength and choice; as Amartya Sen says, with "the freedom ... in determining our priorities".

**This is an edited extract of Stan Grant's Quarterly Essay 64, *The Australian Dream: Blood, History and Becoming*, published by Quarterly Essay, today**